



The United States Attorney's Office

## Central District of California

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Thom Mrozek  
Public Affairs Officer

(213) 894-6947  
thom.mrozek@usdoj.gov

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### **SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA MAN SURRENDERS ON FEDERAL CHARGES OF SMUGGLING PROTECTED TORTOISES INTO THE UNITED STATES**

A Diamond Bar man surrendered to federal agents this morning after being indicted earlier this week for his participation in a scheme that allegedly smuggled dozens of protected and endangered tortoises into the United States.

Wai Ho Gin, who also uses the name "Bobby Gin," self-surrendered without incident to special agents with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. Gin, 31, is expected to make his initial court appearance this afternoon in United States District Court in downtown Los Angeles.

A second defendant indicted Tuesday by a federal grand jury in Los Angeles – Umesh Kishore Tekani, who also uses the name "Mexx" – is a fugitive believed to be in Singapore, from where he allegedly shipped the tortoises that were illegally imported into the United States.

The indictment accuses Gin and Tekani of conspiracy, six counts of smuggling, three counts of importing goods by means of false statements and five counts of money laundering.

Gin and Tekani allegedly worked together to smuggle into the United States Radiated tortoises (*Geochelone radiata*), an endangered species threatened with extinction and protected by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which is implemented in the United States as part of the Endangered Species Act. They are also charged with illegally importing Indian Star tortoises (*Geochelone elegans* or *Testudo elegans*), a threatened species, the trading of which is strictly regulated by CITES. The indictment alleges that Tekani obtained the tortoises in Asia, arranged to ship the animals via common courier to Gin in the United States, where Gin would distribute them to customers across the nation.

The conspiracy and smuggling counts each carry a maximum possible penalty of five years in federal prison. The charge of importing goods by means of false statements carries a potential penalty of two years in prison. The statutory maximum penalty for money laundering is 20 years in prison.

*An indictment contains allegations that a defendant has committed a crime. Every defendant is presumed to be innocent until and unless proven guilty.*

Previously, as part of this investigation, four individuals were charged, pleaded guilty and sentenced to probation for receiving smuggled tortoises from Tekani. They are:

- David Yeh, 35, of Newport Coast, California, who admitted smuggling four Radiated tortoises and four Burmese Star tortoises that he received from Tekani.

Burmese Star tortoises that he received from Tekani;

- Barry Lambert, 36, of La Mesa, California, who admitted smuggling five Pancake tortoises and four Green Tree monitors that he received from Tekani;
- Ralph Hoekstra, 69, of Huntington Beach, California, who admitted smuggling 10 Indian Star tortoises he received from Tekani; and
- Jody Patterson, 46, of Norfolk, Virginia, who pleaded guilty in federal court in Virginia, admitting that she illegally imported and sold 46 Indian Star tortoises and two Radiated tortoises that had been shipped by Tekani.

The investigation into the tortoise-smuggling ring was conducted by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, which is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.

Fish and Wildlife Service Resident Agent in Charge Marie Palladini stated: "the USFWS Office of Law Enforcement continues to pursue its mission to curb the illegal wildlife trade, which is estimated to be between \$10 billion and \$20 billion annually."

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